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Report links secondhand smoke, lung cancer deaths in nonsmokers

By PAUL RAEBURN
Associated Press

NEW YORK — The Environmental Protection Agency will release a long-delayed report that says secondhand cigarette smoke is a human carcinogen and kills about 3,000 nonsmokers a year because of lung cancer, agency officials said Tuesday.

The report, to be released Thursday, also concludes that secondhand smoke increases the risk of pneumonia and bronchitis in children.

The EPA can classify a substance as a carcinogen, but it does not have any power to regulate indoor air. Release of the report, after more than two years of revisions, could trigger an avalanche of federal, state and local regulations limiting smoking in public places, health advocates said.

"Having the EPA's imprimatur on this is extremely important," said Dr. Alfred Munzer of the Coalition on Smoking or Health, which includes the American Lung Association, the American Heart Association and the American Cancer Society. "We believe this will motivate state governments, local governments to enact further regulations limiting smoking in public places."

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– Dr. Alfred Munzer, a spokesman for the Coalition on Smoking or Health

The report also could prod the Occupational Safety and Health Administration to regulate smoking in the work place, health advocates said. Douglas Fuller, an OSHA spokesman, said the agency would weigh the EPA report carefully in its deliberations.

Munzer called on President Bush to use the report to justify an order to restrict smoking in federal buildings. "This is far less controversial than the pardons he has issued and would do a tremendous amount for the

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public health," Munzer said.

The report concludes that secondhand smoke is a proven human carcinogen, putting it in the same class as asbestos, benzene and radon, EPA officials said.

The report's authors said cigarette smoke causes from 400 to 7,000 lung cancer deaths in U.S. nonsmokers annually, with a "best estimate" of 3,000 cases. That's based on conservative assumptions, they said, so the actual total could be higher.

They also said cigarette smoke increases the risk of pneumonia, bronchitis and middle-ear disorders in children. The report also concludes that cigarette smoke increases the severity and frequency of asthma in children, EPA officials said.

The EPA has decided to kill a second report that links secondhand smoke to 37,000 heart-disease deaths annually, said Robert Axelrad, head of the EPA's indoor-air division. The report originally was conceived to be a companion to the lung-cancer report.

The link between cigarette smoke and heart disease is considered even more explosive than the lung-cancer link, because cigarette smoke causes roughly 10 times as many heart-disease as lung-cancer deaths.

The heart association has petitioned the EPA to do its own study of secondhand smoke and heart disease, but the agency hasn't responded. "We have not made a decision to do so at this time," Axelrad said.

The lung-cancer report was the focus of a massive lobbying campaign by the tobacco industry and its allies in Congress, who submitted hundreds of pages of documents to the EPA during the past two years in an effort to delay or water down the report.

Brennan Dawson, a spokeswoman for the Tobacco Institute, said despite the report's revisions, its conclusions were still not supported by existing scientific data: "Any number of independent world-renowned experts have looked at this report and said the EPA has mischaracterized and manipulated the data."

Among the critics of the report was Republican U.S. Rep. Thomas Bliley of Richmond, where the Philip Morris tobacco company is the largest private employer.

Bliley's letters challenging the scientific basis of the EPA report probably consumed "thousands of hours of staff time" preparing responses, one EPA official said.

"The taxpayers are well served by that delay," said James Derderian, a Bliley aide. "We feel it's unfortunate that the (EPA) administrator chose to rush the release of this report when there are still a number of open questions regarding the quality of the science."

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